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UMaine Professors Study Ice Storm Media Deprivation

January 4, 1999

Contact: Peter Cook at 581-3756

ORONO -- The ice storms that left much of Maine without power in January also left people without the mass media that has become so much a part of modern-day life. Two University of Maine professors have studied the impact of this almost total blackout on Maine's population and how the media that remained was used.

Lyombe Eko, assistant professor of journalism and mass communication and Joanne Gula, assistant professor of journalism, surveyed 134 households about the ice storm and the media deprivation that resulted. They have written about their research in a paper that will be presented to the International Communication Association conference next year, *What it Means to be in the Dark in the Information Age: The Ice Storm of '98 and Mass Media Deprivation in Maine*.

Eko and Gula say the modern world has become an information society, characterized by dependence on the mass media and information technology for psychological and social needs and satisfactions. For many, the ice storm pulled the plug on their access to media.

An estimated 800,000 people lost power during the storm for periods ranging from a few hours to two weeks, an estimated four out of five residents. Fifteen of the state's sixteen counties were affected, and Maine was declared a disaster area.

"When the ice storm hit, we saw this as a unique opportunity," says Eko. "Media deprivation is rare, and the last academic study of the near total absence of the mass media was in the 1980's, before the Internet, and we are more dependent on the media now than ever before."

For the study, Eko and Gula first determined whether respondents used the media to meet psychological or sociological needs and to get gratification. Respondents were then asked whether they experienced any discomfort caused by media deprivation. Student volunteers from journalism classes conducted the surveys.

An overwhelming 91 percent of those surveyed said they had lost power and sixteen percent had gone to a shelter. Twenty percent were without a phone for all or part of the period during the ice storm.

"Media loss had some impact on everybody," says Gula. "We looked at a number of different variables, such as political affiliation or socioeconomic status, and there was no demographic difference. The storm was a leveling factor."

The professors found that because people in society are so saturated with the various mass media, a psychological bond is formed with favorite news anchors or characters in shows.

"There is a psychological connection there," says Eko. "When some people were deprived of that, they didn't know what to do with themselves." Very few respondents overall, however, felt overly disoriented because of the near-total media blackout. One of the reasons for this was the radio.

Most electronic media outlets, including the Public Broadcasting System and the Emergency Warning system, were silenced as a result of the storm. The only alternative became local radio stations that transformed themselves into community instruments. Two in particular, WVOM and WWBX played 24-hour a day storm-related programming.

<http://www.umaine.edu/news/Archives/1999/Jan99/icestorm.htm>

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During the storm, Governor King and members of Maine's Congressional delegation used radio several times to communicate directly to the people of the state. The utility companies also used the radio stations to give updates about the extent of the damage and the time it would take to restore power to customers. Eko and Gula say because of this, radio returned to its original mission, providing information.

“Radio is not the medium that people think of when they need information,” says Eko. “During the storm, though, it stepped in and filled the social need people had and allowed those without power to feel part of a community again.”